



Dating R.I.'s oldest houses is part science, part art

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Rhode Island's rich Colonial history is evident in proud, historical homes that dot the landscape, from Newport to Lincoln and Bristol to Providence.

Incentives for dating these homes are varied, from increased understanding of the birth and early development of the state, to the cachet that comes with membership in an exclusive club.

Regardless of the motives, determining the age of the earliest of these relics is an inexact science that often frustrates owners and historians alike.

Don Hysko knows the feeling. He bought the Israel Arnold House in Lincoln 34 years ago. A sign outside the house claims it dates from between 1695 and 1715. If the earlier date is correct, as Hysko, 68, believes, then the house on Great Road is one of the oldest private residences in the state.

But the Rhode Island Historical Preservation & Heritage Commission thinks the house is a bit younger, probably dating to 1740.

Various publications have further muddied the waters by dating the house between 1700 and 1750.

And the National Register of Historic Places lists its "period of significance" as between 1700 and 1799.

"What I've been trying to do is sort it all out and come up with a definitive date, but I haven't been able to. It's frustrating," lamented Hysko, who is now selling the house and moving out of state.

The preservation and heritage commission is the state authority, but it is careful not to make definitive claims about most 17th- and early 18th-century structures because "we are not always right," said Executive Director Edward Sanderson. "Tracing a house back a couple of hundred years can be pretty tricky. Early Rhode Island, particularly before 1700, in some ways is an unknown country."

COLONIAL records have been lost or are incomplete in many communities.

When there is a paper trail, people often mistakenly assume that the date the land was sold, as shown in land records, can be used as the date when a house was built on that land. But the house in question may have been built much later.

"Over 300 years, often there's been more than one building on these lands," Sanderson said.

Another complication, according to Sanderson, is that "early buildings tended to be small. What looks like an ell on a large building may be the original building.

"Often you really can't get definitive information, unless you rip them apart. But most people don't want to take down their plaster wall and cut into the structure."

The Israel Arnold House was once believed by some local historians to have been built in two parts, with the earliest part dating to around 1700.

Restoration work done soon after Hysko bought the property determined that both sections were built at the same time, according to a 1982 state survey of the town's oldest structures.

That restoration work dated the structure to about 1740, though Hysko remains unconvinced.

He cites the location of the oven, the type of siding and the original hardware still found on doors in the house as evidence that it was built prior to 1700.

The issue has been important to him, he says, because he has antiques in the house matching the earlier construction date.

"I like to say I have period antiques in there," he said.

He and his wife, Pat, have also been involved in local historic preservation efforts.

Hysko recently sold his hardwood charcoal company, People's Woods, which makes Nature's Own Chunk Charwood. He has received national attention for his expertise on grilling and entertaining, including an appearance on Martha Stewart's television show.

ARCHITECTURAL styles and construction methods can date a structure to a given period, much like "if you are looking at fashion, you can pretty much tell if a dress is from the 1960s," Sanderson said.

But specific dates of construction associated with many of the older houses in the state have often changed the more they have been studied, he said.

"Most of the people who do this research, particularly homeowners and [amateur] historians, are trying to make buildings as early as they can," Sanderson said. "Careful research often shows that old things are not as old as originally thought."

An increasingly relied-upon method of wood-dating known as dendrochronology, or tree-ring dating, has begun clearing up questions about some of Rhode Island's oldest houses, he said.

But the process can be costly and time-consuming and doesn't always produce definitive results.

The nonprofit Newport Restoration Foundation spent nearly \$14,000 on a dendrochronology study of timber from six houses. It took the England-based laboratory that did the work more than a year to complete its report.

The results, released earlier this year, found one house to be older than previously thought, another probably newer and three about what was expected. The last came back with an uncertain date because timbers that were analyzed might not have been new at the time of construction.

The foundation is eager to do more dendrochronology studies on some of those sites, and others, preservation coordinator Robert Foley says. The work may help provide clues to the Colonial-era timber trade in the region, as well as the origin of architectural styles common in 18th-century Newport.

"The more this is done, the more connections you are possibly able to make" about life in early Rhode Island, Foley said.

The state preservation and heritage commission also wants to know more about that time.

The commission has begun a project looking at the state prior to 1750. Preliminary results are expected in a year. A related study is focusing on 17th-century Bristol.

"What I'm hoping we find is not just what buildings survived, but also the sites of buildings" that didn't survive, Sanderson said. Early roads are also being explored.

"This will pull back the veil on a part of the state's history we don't know well," he said.

AS FOR the Israel Arnold House, Hysko says it'll be up to the next owner to decide whether to undertake more definitive testing.

Regardless of its exact age, the house has long been recognized as a rare and historically significant survivor of the Colonial period.

"It's just a great house," Hysko said.

The Israel Arnold House is for sale at \$849,000. Patricia Perfetto of Residential Properties, Cumberland, (401) 333-6015, has the listing.

And the state's very oldest are . . .

There are several candidates for the title of Rhode Island's oldest house. Choosing among them has been too tough even for the experts who have studied them, in part because they haven't all undergone the same level of scrutiny and examination.

The candidates are certainly part of an exclusive club. There are at least 13 pre-1700 dwellings in the state, according to the Rhode Island Historical Preservation & Heritage Commission. And there could be more, since many old dwellings haven't been fully studied by experts or historians.

The following structures are among the earliest residences in the state:

White Horse Tavern, Newport, 1673

One of the oldest tavern buildings in the country, it was originally built as a two-room, two-story residence. This was the meeting place of the Colony's General Assembly, criminal court and City Council.

Thomas Fenner House, Cranston, 1677

Arthur Fenner originally built this as a one-room, two-story stone-ender for his son Thomas. The house was expanded in 1834 and used as a tavern for most of the 19th century.

Edward Searle House, Cranston, 1677

This was originally a 1 1/2-story, stone-end dwelling in an area known as Searle's Corners.

Capt. John Mawdsley House, Newport, 1680

The earliest portion of the house may have been built by Jireh Bull after his marriage in 1680 to Godsgift Arnold, daughter of Gov. Benedict Arnold. This was a substantial house for the period, with two stories, a lobby entry and a center chimney.

Gorton-Greene House, Warwick, 1685

This 2 1/2-story, gable-roofed structure has a massive stone chimney. The original structure was built by Samuel Gorton Jr., and was later bought by his niece's husband, Samuel Greene. This was the home of two 18th-century Rhode Island governors -- and George Washington was among its famous visitors.

Palmer-Northrup House, North Kingstown, 1680s

This started as a one-room stone-ender. The state historical preservation commission says the probable period of construction was after King Philip's War (1675-'76), during which many homes were burned. There are some who believe that the house may have survived the war, which, if proven, could make it Rhode Island's oldest.

Congdon-Watson House, South Kingstown, 1690-1700

This is a gambrel-roofed, wood-shingled house with large fieldstone chimneys. It was part of a large estate that included several buildings set on a landscaped lot behind stone walls.

Clemence-Irons House, Johnston, 1691

One of the earliest preserved dwellings in the state, this is one of the most carefully documented restorations of an early Rhode Island house in Providence County. This stone-ender has a large stone chimney that might date to before 1650.

Eleazer Arnold House, Lincoln, 1693

This is considered the best example of early stone-ender houses indigenous to Rhode Island, due to the area's plentiful supply of building stone and lime for mortar.

Valentine Whitman House, Lincoln, 1694

This stone-ender has two stories and was built on a four-room plan. The great-end chimney extends across one end of the gable-roofed structure. The Whitman family was among the first to settle in the "North Woods" of Lincoln.

Wanton-Lyman-Hazard House, Newport, 1696

The house is the site of the Stamp Act Riot of 1765, and was home to Colonial governors, justices and patriots. Considered one of New England's best Jacobean houses, the structure is representative of architectural transition from the 17th century to the 18th.

William Congdon House, South Kingstown, 1696

This was originally a modest end-chimney dwelling, but the house was radically changed in 1930. The structure was transformed from a typical, early Rhode Island dwelling into a Neo-Colonial residence.

Joseph Reynolds House, Bristol, 1698

Possibly the oldest house in Bristol, it was unusually large for the period, with three stories and a garret. The Marquis de Lafayette used this house as his headquarters in 1778.

Sources: Rhode Island Historical Preservation & Heritage Commission; The National Register of Historic Places; Bristol Historical Society; Newport Historical Society; and Early Homes of Rhode Island, copyright 1977 by Arno Press Inc. and the Early American Society Inc.